

WOMAN and SUFISM¹

~ Camille Adams Helminski

Since the beginning of consciousness, human beings, both female and male, have walked the path of return, of recognition and re-union with the Source of Being. Though in this world of duality we may find ourselves in different forms, ultimately, within Truth, there is no male or female, only Being. Within the Sufi traditions, the recognition of this truth has made possible the spiritual maturation of women in a way that has not always been possible in the West.

From the earliest days onward, women have played an important role in the development of Sufism, which is classically understood to have begun with the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad brought a message of integration of spirit and matter, of essence and everyday life, of recognition of the feminine as well as the masculine. Though cultural manifestations have layered over some of the original purity of intention, the words of the *Qur'an* convey the equality of women and men before the eyes of God. At a time when the goddess-worshipping Arabian tribes were still quite barbaric, even burying infant girls alive in favor of male offspring, this new voice of the Abrahamic tradition attempted to reestablish the recognition of the Unity of Being. It tried to address the imbalances that had arisen, advising respect and honor for the feminine as well as for the graciousness and harmony of nature.

In the early years of this new revelation, Muhammad's beloved wife, Khadija, filled a role of great importance. It was she who sustained, strengthened, and supported him against his own doubt and bewilderment. She stood beside him in the midst of extreme difficulty and anguish and helped carry the light of the new faith. It was to Muhammad's and Khadija's daughter, Fatima, to whom the deeper mystical understanding of Islam was first conveyed, and indeed she is often recognized as the first Muslim mystic. Her marriage with 'Ali bound this new manifestation of mysticism into this world, and the seeds of their union began to blossom.

As the mystical side of Islam developed, it was a woman, Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (717-801 A.D.), who first clearly expressed the relationship with the Divine in the language we have come to recognize as particularly Sufic, by referring to God as the Beloved. Rabi'a was the first human being to speak of the realities of Sufism with a clear language that anyone could understand. Though she experienced many difficulties in her early years, Rabi'a's starting point was neither fear of hell, nor desire for paradise, but only love. Her method was love for God because "God is God; for this I love God . . . not because of any gifts, but for Itself." Her aim was to melt her being in God. According to her, one could find God by turning within oneself. As Muhammad said, "He who knows himself knows his Lord." It is love that carries and sustains us through this process. The door of Sufism will finally open only with Love, because though knowledge may be important and can assist in our discrimination along the way and may help us to reach the threshold it is ultimately through Love that we are brought into unity of Being.

Throughout the centuries, women as well as men have continued to carry the Light of this Love. For many reasons, in many places, the women have been less visible than the men, less verbal, less demonstrative in society at large, but nevertheless, active participants. Within some Sufi circles that developed over the centuries women were integrated with men in ceremonies; in other orders women gathered in their own circles of remembrance and worshiped apart from men. Some women devoted themselves to Spirit ascetically apart from society as Rabi'a did; others chose the role of benefactress and fostered circles of worship and study. Many of the great masters with whom we are familiar had teachers, students, and spiritual friends who were women and who greatly influenced

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their thought and being. And wives and mothers gave support to their family members while continuing their own journey towards union with the Beloved.

Ibn 'Arabi, the great "Pole of Knowledge" (1165-1240 A.D.) in his notes tells us of time spent with two elderly women mystics who had a profound influence on him—Shams of Marchena, one of the "sighing ones," and Fatima of Cordova. Of Fatima, with whom he spent a great deal of time, he says:

I served as a disciple one of the lovers of God, a gnostic, a lady of Seville called Fatimah bint Ibn al-Muthanna of Cordova. I served her for several years, she being over ninety-five years of age. . . . She used to play on the tambourine and show great pleasure in it. When I spoke to her about it she answered, 'I take joy in Him Who has turned to me and made me one of His Friends (Saints), using me for His own purposes. Who am I that He should choose me among mankind? He is jealous of me for, whenever I turn to something other than He in heedlessness [*ghaflah*, the opposite of remembrance, *dhiker*, and thus a lapse from true awareness into illusion], He sends me some affliction concerning that thing.' . . . With my own hands I built for her a hut of reeds as high as she, in which she lived until she died. She used to say to me, 'I am your spiritual mother and the light of your earthly mother.' When my mother came to visit her, Fatimah said to her, 'O light, this is my son and he is your father, so treat him filially and dislike him not.'"²

When Bayazid Bestami (d.874), another well-known master, was asked who his master was, he said it was an old woman whom he had met in the desert. This woman had called him a vain tyrant and showed him why: by requiring a lion to carry a sack of flour, he was oppressing a creature God himself had left unburdened, and by wanting recognition for such miracles, he was showing his vanity. Her words gave him spiritual guidance for some time.

Another woman for whom Bestami had great regard was Fatima Nishapuri (d.838) of whom he said, "There was no station [on the Way] about which I told her that she had not already undergone."³ Someone once asked the great Egyptian sufi master Dho'n-Nun Mesri, "Who in your opinion, is the highest among the sufis?" He replied, "A lady in Mecca, called Fatemah Nishapuri, whose discourse displayed a profound apprehension of the inner meanings of the Qur'an which were astounding." Further pressed to comment on Fatemah, he added, "She is of the saints of God, and my teacher."⁴ She once counseled him, "In all your actions, watch that you act with sincerity and in opposition to your lower self (*nafs*)."⁵ She also said, "Whoever doesn't have God in his consciousness is erring and in delusion, whatever language he speaks, whatever company he keeps. Yet, whoever holds God's company never speaks except with sincerity and assiduously adheres to a humble reserve and earnest devotion in his conduct."⁶

The wife of the ninth-century Sufi, Al-Hakim at-Tirmidhi was a mystic in her own right. She used to dream for her husband as well as for herself. Khidr, the mysterious one, would appear to her in her dreams. One night Khidr told her to tell her husband to guard the purity of his house. Concerned that perhaps Khidr was referring to the lack of cleanliness that sometimes occurred due to their young children, she questioned Khidr in her dream. Khidr responded by pointing to his tongue: she was to tell her husband to be mindful of the purity of his speech.

Among the women who followed the Way of Love and Truth, there were some who rejoiced, and some who continuously wept. Sha'wana, a Persian, was one of those who wept. Men and women gathered around her to hear her songs and melodious discourses. She used to say, "The eyes which are prevented from beholding the Beloved, and yet are desirous of looking upon Him, cannot be fit for that Vision without weeping."⁷ She was not only "blinded by tears of penitence, but dazzled by

² Ibn 'Arabi, *Sufis of Andalusia*, p.25-26.

³ Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Women*, p.162.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Smith, Margaret. *Rabi'a the Mystic and Her Fellow Saints in Islam*, p.146.

the radiant glory of the Beloved.”⁸ During her life she experienced intimate closeness with the Friend, or God. This profoundly influenced her devout husband and son (who became a saint himself). Sha’wana became one of the best-known teachers and guides of her time.

One of those who rejoiced was Fedha, who was also a married woman. She taught that “joy of heart should be happiness based on what we inwardly sense; therefore we should always strive to rejoice within our heart, till everyone around us also rejoices.”⁹

For the most part, the words of women in Sufism which remain from centuries past come from traditional accounts of their comments or from poems that developed around their words. Though the Qur’an strongly encourages the pursuit of knowledge and education for women as well as men, women sometimes received fewer opportunities than men in similar circumstances. I will not be attempting here to address the evolving role of women in exoteric Islam, as it is varied and complex. We must recognize, though, that women in general around the world have often faced prejudicial treatment because of their gender. Within Islamic society as well as within our own, difficult treatment of women has occurred in some cases obvious, in some cases insidious. Though local cultural overlays and male-dominated jurisprudence may have increased restrictions on women in various areas, the Qur’an basically enjoins mutual respect and valuation of the human being regardless of sex or social situation. Within Sufism, this more essential Qur’anic attitude has prevailed.

The cultures in which Sufism was practiced tended to convey more material orally than in written form, and women in particular may have had less of a tendency to write, preferring instead to simply live their experience. Nevertheless, there were women who wrote of their mystical experience in songs, in journals, and in critical exposition. As western scholarship brings more of these works into translation, more of the story of Sufism is becoming accessible to us.

As this story unfolds, we are discovering the work and lives of many Sufi sisters. Among these was Fatima, or Jahan-Ara, the favorite daughter of Shah Jahan, the Mughal emperor of India (1592-1666). Fatima wrote an account of her initiation entitled *Risala-i Sahibiyya* which is known as a beautiful and erudite exposition of the flowering of Sufism within her heart.

‘A’isha of Damascus was one of the well-known mystics of the fifteenth century. She wrote a famous commentary of Khwaja ‘Abdo’llah Ansari’s *Stations on the Way (Manazel as-sa’erin)* entitled *Veiled Hints within the Stations of the Saints (Al-esbarat al-khafiyys fi’l-manazel al-anliyya)*.¹⁰ Bibi Hayati Kermani belonged to a family immersed in the Sufi tradition. Her brother was a sheikh of the Nimutallahi order and she became the wife of the master of the order. After her marriage, she composed a *divan* (collection of poems) that revealed her integration of both the outer and inner knowledge of Sufism.

Among the Bektashis, an order in which women have always been integrated together with men in ceremonies, many women have continued the tradition of composing sacred songs (*ilabis*). In 1987, a songbook, *Gul Deste* (“Rose Bouquet”) was published in Turkey. It brings together sacred hymns written by women and men within the Bektashi tradition from the nineteenth century to the present day.

Sufi women around the world today continue to teach and to share their experience personally as well as in written form. In the Sudan, for instance, there continue to be sheikhas who are particularly adept in the healing arts. In the Middle East, women continue to mature in many Sufi orders. In Turkey in particular, the teachings continue through women as well as men, perhaps even more so now than in the past because of Attaturk’s proscription of the Sufi orders early in the century, which drove much of Sufi practice into private homes. One luminous lady, Samiha Ayverdi,

⁸ Ibid, p.148.

⁹ Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Women*, p. 165.

¹⁰ Nurbakhsh, Dr. Javad, *Sufi Women*, p.147.

carried the Rifa'i tradition in Istanbul until her recent death; Zeynep Hatun of Ankara continues to inspire people in Turkey and abroad with her poems and songs.

In central Turkey, the mother of a friend of ours one day heard someone knocking and answered her door. A man stood at her threshold with a message. He had come to ask her to lead a Naqshbandi women's circle. He explained that his sheikh, who lived quite a distance away, had seen her in a dream, and had sent him to the place that had been indicated. When our friend's mother protested that she did not know his sheikh and felt inadequate for such a responsibility, the man replied, "Do not worry. Our sheikh has seen your purity. He says that whenever you have a question you should hold that question in your heart, and in your dreams he will bring you the answer." Thus began her apprenticeship.

Sufi schools spread from the Middle East to Europe long ago, and new waves continue to arrive. Irina Tweedie, author of *Daughter of Fire*, recently conveyed an Indian branch of the Naqshbandi line back to her native England. Her work is being continued in America through the Golden Sufi Center in California. This is one of the many branches of Sufism which are beginning to take root in America.

A popular strain of Sufism that has been very welcoming of women here in America is the Chishti Order which was brought to America by Hazrat Inayat Khan. Of the many women involved, Murshida Vera Corda is perhaps the most well-known spokesperson. Her work with children in particular has been a great inspiration to many parents.

One branch of Sufism that has become better known in the West in recent years is the Mevlevi. Within this tradition, a way founded upon the example of Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi, women have always been deeply respected, honored, and invited to participate in all aspects of the spiritual path. There have often been female Mevlevi sheikhas who have guided both women and men. Mevlana himself had many female disciples, and women were also encouraged to participate in *sema*,¹¹ the musical whirling ceremony of the Mevlevis. (Women usually had their own *semas*, but sometimes performed *semas* together with men.) One of Mevlana's chief disciples was Fakhr an-Nisa. She was known as the Rabi'a of her age. In recent years, for various reasons of renovation and road rerouting, it was decided to reconstruct her tomb. As Shaikh Suleyman Hayati Dede was then the acting spiritual head of the Mevlevi order, he was asked to be present when she was exhumed. He told of how, when her body was uncovered, it was totally intact and the fragrance of roses filled the air.

Of course such women have always existed and have brought much light into our world; one might ask how anyone could question otherwise. Unfortunately in many parts of the world in many eras, in various spiritual traditions, this has been questioned. Within Sufism, however, though practical manifestation may differ according to brother/sisterhood, women have always been respected as equals on the spiritual path. Everyone, regardless of gender, is expected to establish his or her own direct connection with the Divine.

Within Sufism, the language of the Beloved and the recognition of the feminine helps to balance some of the old cultural stereotypes that were sometimes used in expository writing and which the Western media have chosen to highlight. Jelaluddin Rumi often speaks beautifully of the feminine and presents woman as the most perfect example of God's creative power on earth. As he says in the *Mathnawi*, "Woman is a ray of God. She is not just the earthly beloved: she is creative, not created."

It is precisely this creative ability and the coincident capacity for relationship and love which suits women so well for the Sufi way of opening to relationship with the Divine. As we come to recognize the magnificence of the Benevolent Source of Life, we can come to see ourselves in harmony with that Source. In the *Qur'an*, each *surah* (chapter) of the revelation begins with *Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim* which means "In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful." *Rahman* speaks to the fundamental beneficence inherent in the Divine nature; *Rahim* to the particular mercy which manifests. Both words come from the same root which is the word for "womb." God's mercy and benevolence is always emphasized as being greater than God's wrath; the encompassing generosity and nurturance of the Divine is the milieu in which we live.

¹¹ Sema or sam'a, means "listening." As-Sami' is the name of God, the "All-Hearing." The term was adopted by Mevlevis to refer to their sacred whirling ceremony which also is called a *mukabele*, or "meeting face to face."

As women, we come from the womb and carry the womb. We give birth from the womb and can find ourselves born into the womb of Being. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is very much revered in Sufism and Islam as an example of one who continually took refuge with the Divine and opened to receive divine inspiration within the womb of her being. As women we have a great capacity for patience, for nurturing, for love. A contemporary male Sufi teacher once described an ideal guide as one who is like a mother one who is always there for her child, not demanding though willing to instruct and set limits, but also willing to stay up all night or get up at any hour to nurse a suffering child.

Sufism recognizes that committed relationship and family are not contrary to the flowering of spirituality, but rather wonderful vessels for spiritual ripening. The beauty of life and partnership, children, and wider family are great blessings, containing the inspiration, the breathing in, of the Divine. As we deepen our capacity for relationship and fidelity in the human sphere, we also increase our capacity for relationship with the Divine.

We need to stand together in the Light. Especially in our own time, the way is opening for greater recognition of equal partnership. We have much to learn from each other, and male and female need to recognize each other so that we can come to balance within ourselves as well as create balance outwardly in the world. The male attributes of strength and determination also belong to women; the feminine attributes of receptivity and beauty also belong to men. As we look to see the Divine in each other, encouraging each other to rise to the fullness of his or her own divine nature, we push against our own limitations until those limits dissolve and a gift unfolds. As we learn to witness the miracle of creation, a time comes when *Wheresoever you look, there is the Face of God; everything is perishing except the One Face.* [Qur'an, 2:115]

Whether we choose celibacy or committed partnership, whether we are female or male, the same work remains of polishing the mirror of the heart, of being in remembrance moment by moment, breath by breath. Each moment we reaffirm the inner marriage until there is no longer lover or Beloved but only Unity of Being. Little by little, we die to that which we thought we were. We are dissolved into Love, and we become love, God willing.

As Rabi'a says,

In love, nothing exists between breast and Breast.
Speech is born out of longing,
true description from the real taste.
The one who tastes, knows;
the one who explains, lies.
How can you describe the true form of Something
in whose Presence you are blotted out?
And in whose Being you still exist?
And Who lives as a sign for your journey?¹²

¹² Charles Upton, *Doorkeeper of the Heart, Versions of Rabi'a*, p.36.